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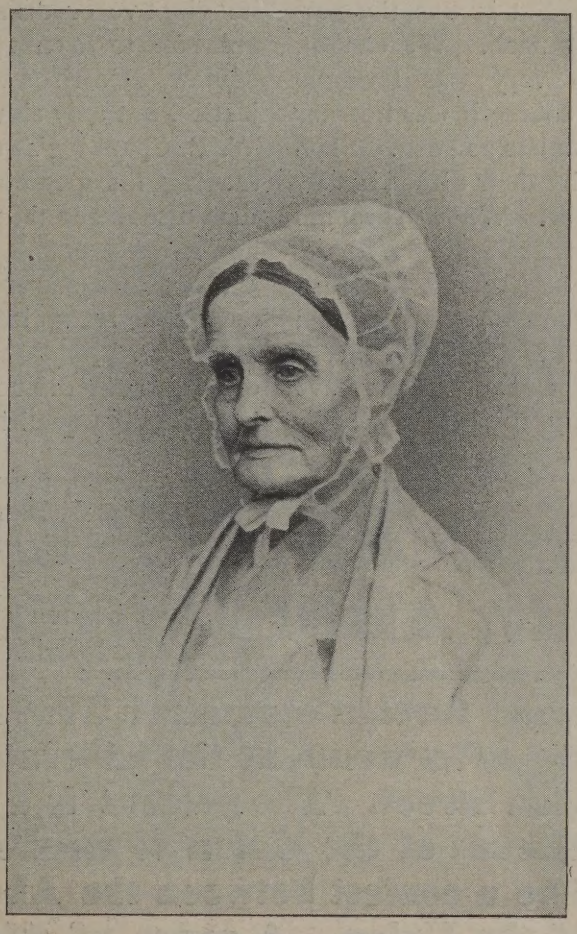
Anti-Slavery Days

By Thomas Wentworth Higginson

NO one can really understand the great anti-slavery movement of the early years of this century who thinks of it merely as an agitation, a discussion, a series of public meetings, or a set of tracts. It was in reality a cult, a moral organization, a tie akin to freemasonry. With a minimum of visible or potent machinery, it had a maximum of cohesion; without technical grips or passwords, it afforded a tie which united men and women of all ages, colors, races, and religions. When its members met and made acquaintance with one another, it was like a meeting of early Christians or of French Huguenots. They had the comradeship of minorities; a thing incomparably more vital and real than the alliance of majorities. When the anti-slavery lecturer found himself in a house whose walls bore the picture of Garrison or Whittier, he knew himself to be at home. Grades of education were as nothing; people met because they "saw eye to eye" or "had the root of the matter in them," these being frequent phrases of the Abolitionists. Race was nothing, or nationality; Germans were usually of the faithful; Englishmen often; Irishmen rarely, but when they were so their strength was as the strength of ten, because of their zeal. Social distinctions were nothing; Mrs. Maria Weston Chapman had the bearing that might befit a line of duchesses; Wendell Phillips and Edmund Quincy were pointed out by an English visitor who was standing in George Ticknor's window when they passed up Park Street, as "the only men he had yet seen in America who looked like gentlemen." Side by side with them, on the platform, were fugitive slaves, perhaps still clad in their plantation rags, still walking heavily as if clogged with Virginia clay at every footstep. One of these, whom I well recall at his first clumsy arrival, afterwards ripened into the magnificent presence of Frederick Douglass.



LUCRETIA MOTT
From a photograph taken at about the age of 75.

Yet not even cohesion through a great principle can bind people to see precisely "eye to eye," after all; and this body of reformers was rent more than once by divisions into which the participants threw themselves with the whole fire of their natures. The main line of cleavage was between the Garrisonians or Disunion Abolitionists and the voting Abolitionists, called by their opponents "New Organizationists," and by themselves "Liberty Party" and then "Free Soilers" and finally "Republicans." The feud was complicated by business questions, of which the transfer of the "Emancipator" newspaper from the Garrisonian side to the "New Organization" was the chief; and it was in connection with this that the calm and moderate Whittier spoke to me of Garrison as having acted the part of Robespierre, telling me also that he had personally seen a letter from Mrs. Chapman, Garrison's firm and able ally, in which she used the expression, "As to Whittier, the only question is whether he is more knave or fool." These phrases hint at those bitter internal hostilities of the early days of abolitionism which have been preserved with only too much detail in the elaborate and very carefully written life of

Garrison by his sons, on the one side; and in the life of William Birney by his son, and in Goodell's "Slavery and Anti-Slavery," on the other. I need only say that, in my judgment, neither side was wholly free from blame, and that both parties kept, on the whole, higher laws than they broke. I have repeatedly spoken at meetings held by both wings; and while the voting Abolitionists or "New Organization" had always to offer the stimulus of actual participation in elections, yet the Garrisonian meetings, where such action was eschewed, had a freedom, a vigor, and a variety which made them far more attractive and more stimulating. Their tone may have been narrow, but it was the narrowness of the lightning flash. We cannot, of course, say that slavery was formally abolished by them; of course it was not, nor by any band of Abolitionists as such. Slavery was destroyed, not by their direct, but by their secondary, influence. When Abraham Lincoln said to ex-Governor Daniel H. Chamberlain, of South Carolina (April 6, 1865), "I have been only an instrument; the logic and moral power of Garrison and the anti-slavery people of the country and the army have done all," he summed up the whole history of abolitionism, and made no mistake as to the leadership he recognized.

No sentences yet added to American literature, it seems to me, are surer of a permanent hold than those words in which Garrison threw down the gauntlet to the pro-slavery or indifferent community, "I will not equivocate, I will not excuse, I will not retreat a single inch, and I will be heard." In direct moral force, in absolute integrity, Garrison fairly won the leadership he held; and what was sometimes called tyranny by such strong leaders as Whittier and the Grimké sisters was not so much a spirit of autocracy as an inexorable purpose, combined with some want of that imaginative or dramatic element which enables one to do entire justice to another's point of view. Garrison was not reluctant to do this justice, but only slow in doing it. After Dr. W. E. Channing's death, for instance, and on reading his memoirs, Garrison for the first time discovered that he was neither a cold nor nor a timid man. Yet Mrs. Lydia Maria Child, a firm supporter of Garrison, editing one of the recognized newspapers of his own organization, while he edited the other, discovered without difficulty, aided by a woman's keenness, the qualities to which Garrison was

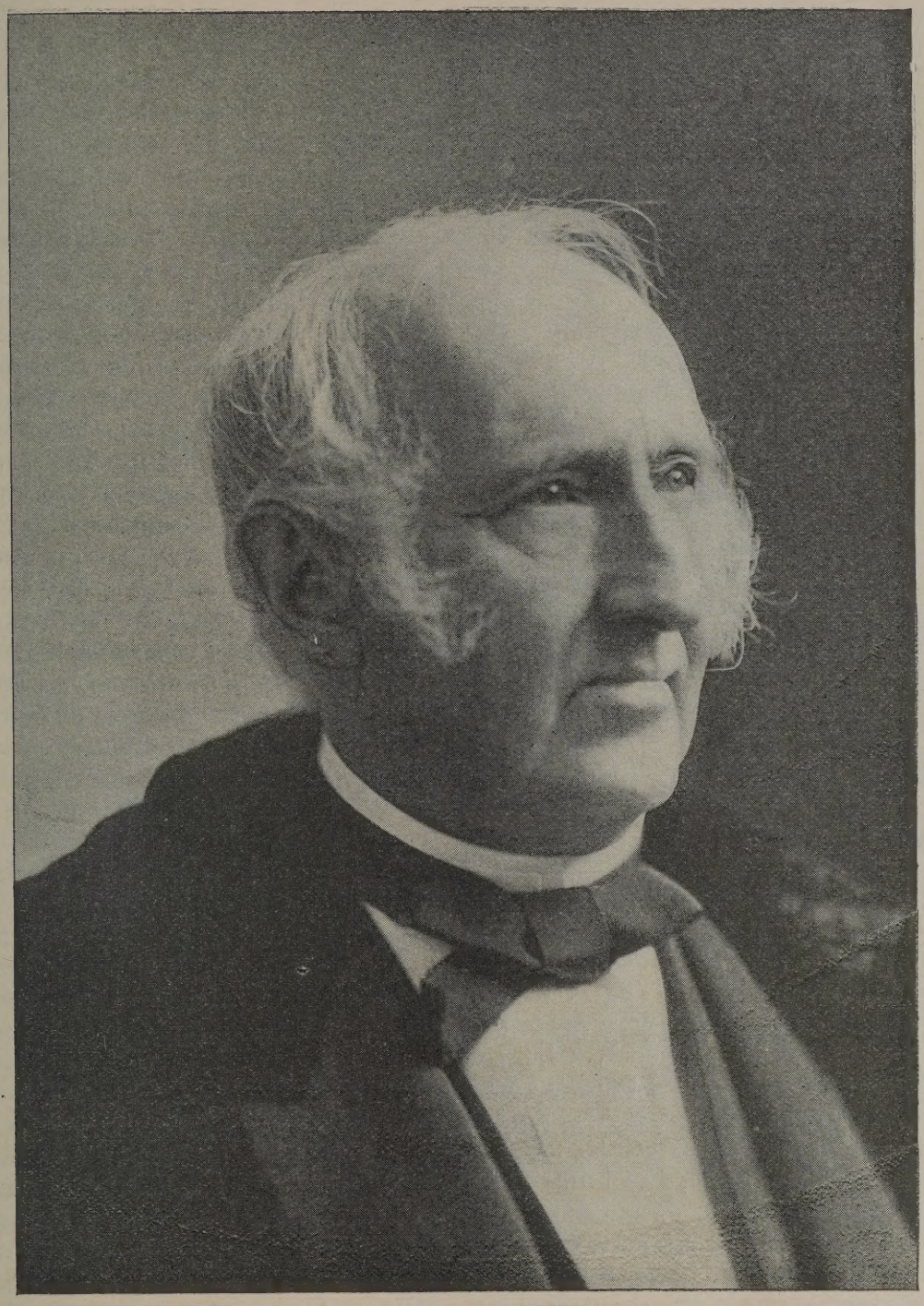
THOMPSON,
THE ABOLITIONIST.

That infamous foreign scoundrel THOMPSON, will hold forth *this afternoon*, at the Liberator Office, No. 48, Washington Street. The present is a fair opportunity for the friends of the Union to *snake Thompson out!* It will be a contest between the Abolitionists and the friends of the Union. A purse of $100 has been raised by a number of patriotic citizens to reward the individual who shall first lay violent hands on Thompson, so that he may be brought to the tar kettle before dark. Friends of the Union, be vigilant!

Boston, Wednesday, 12 o'clock.

PRO-SLAVERY HANDBILL

This was printed at the office of the Boston "Commercial Gazette," under the direction of the proprietor, James L. Homer, on the 21st of October, 1835, and was directed against George Thompson, who was then causing great excitement by his eloquent addresses against slavery. The poster was set up and run off on a hand-press by two apprentices of Homer, one of whom was George C. Rand, subsequently a master printer of Boston and the first printer of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." These two boys then distributed them among the bar-rooms and barber-shops of the business section of the city, with the result that by two o'clock a raging mob of 5,000 people was gathered about the anti-slavery office, and shortly after laid violent hands upon Mr. Garrison, in the absence of Mr. Thompson, who was out of the city.



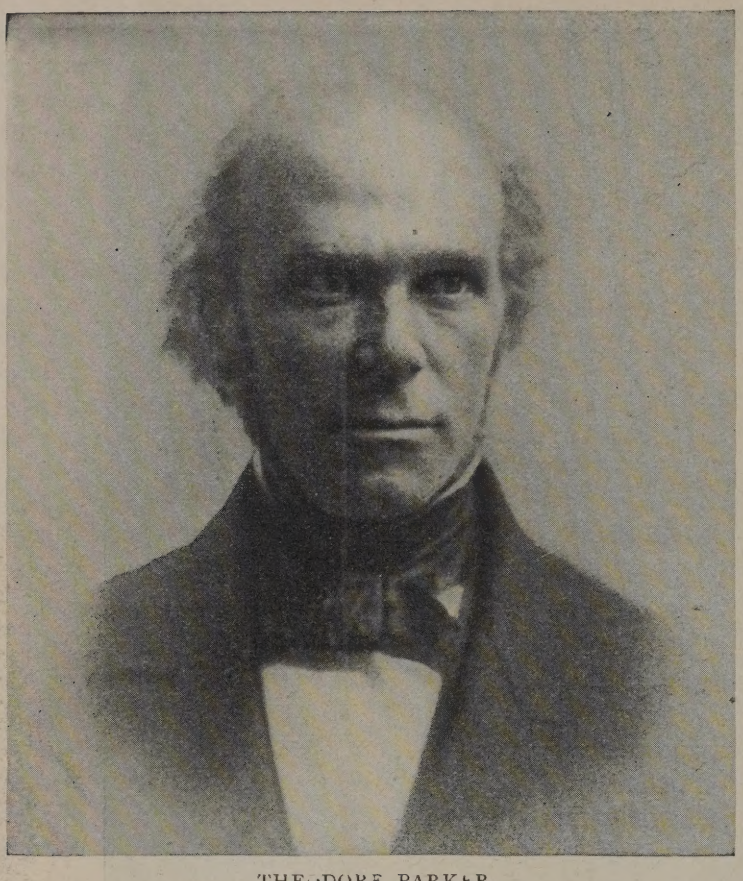
WENDELL PHILLIPS

From a photograph by Sarony, of New York, taken about 1880.

so long blind. She says of Channing, "At first I thought him timid and even slightly time-serving, but I soon discovered that I formed this estimate merely from ignorance of his character. I learned that it was justice for all, not popularity for himself, which rendered him so cautious. He constantly grew upon my respect, until I came to regard him as the wisest as well as the justest apostle of humanity. I owe him thanks for helping to preserve me from the one-sidedness into which zealous reformers are apt to run. . . . Some zealous reformers misunderstood this, and construed into a love of popularity what was, in fact, but a fine sense of justice, a more universal love of his species."[1]

Garrison's criticism of Channing touched, moreover, on a question of justice—the only point on which, as I think, the Abolitionists were liable to criticism. Garrison says of Channing that while "he saw with great clearness and deplored with much sincerity the horrors of slavery and the injustice of slaveholding," yet "he did not like to hear slaveholders denounced, and regarded many of them as worthy of Christian recognition."

[1] Clarke's Anti-Slavery Days, p. 132.



THEODORE PARKER
Photographed from a daguerreotype. Date unknown.

This brings the question back to what is always the point most difficult of solution in any moral reform—the allowance to be made for the individual sinner. That the anti-slavery agitation needed to be made personal, within just limits, is unquestionable; but the only point on which it seems to me, in looking back, that the Garrisonian Abolitionists sometimes went beyond actual justice, and therefore beyond the truth, was in their construction of these limits. I remember one occasion when Stephen Foster—"the reviled and pelted Stephen," as Lowell called him; personally one of the noblest and most loving natures among them all, whose deep, rich voice had in it more of mellow benignity than any voice I ever yet heard—was arguing with one of the stray slaveholders who sometimes came, chivalrously enough, upon the anti-slavery platform to argue their cause; and I recall how Foster bluntly contradicted some statement by his opponent. "Do you think I would lie?" asked the indignant Southerner. "I can't tell as to that," pursued the indomitable Stephen; "I *know* you steal." This was a bit of ready and merciless logic such as sweeps away an audience, yet brings it no nearer to the truth. Doubtless a speaker must not shrink from going beyond abstract truth to its living applications; but such applications have not always an accurate or precise justice. Suppose, as was perfectly possible, that this young man had inherited slaves in a State where, as in Georgia, emancipation was absolutely prohibited, and where the laws expressly provided that any slaves found without a master were at once to be sold at auction to the highest bidder;[1] suppose that this young man, impoverished by slavery itself, was absolutely unable to transport the whole body of his slaves to a free country, even had the law permitted; and what utter injustice to call him a "man-thief," or to say that he "stole" his slaves! To liberate one's own slaves, as Birney and Palfrey did, was of course a simple duty; although even in Palfrey's case this could only be done by obtaining a special act in Louisiana, where the laws were milder; but what could a man do, situated as I have described this imaginary young Georgian, except to remain where he was and be a humane slaveholder? That Channing should regard such a man as "worthy of Christian recognition" does Channing honor; and although such men were doubtless in a very small minority, it was precisely that which made their case the hardest. It was this aspect alone of the matter which the Abolitionists failed to meet quite squarely, in my opinion, either in their publications or on the platform. Mrs. Stowe was more discriminating; St. Clair hated slavery, but could do nothing about it because his slaves belonged really to his wife, who had no such feeling.

Of all the public meetings I ever attended, those of the Anti-Slavery Society were for many years the most interesting. They were never tame, never trammeled, seldom weighed down by long-winded or tedious speakers. The predominance of the non-resistant element made them liberal as to points of order; and the experiment of forcibly expelling the two unquestionably insane intruders—Father Lamson and Abby Folsom—was very

[1] In North and South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi the laws were almost equally restrictive. See Stroud's "Slave Laws" (1827), pp. 146-9.

rarely tried, and was stoutly opposed by many of the faithful. There was no monotony of opinion, because there were many speakers who—like Theodore Parker, Henry Wilson, Francis W. Bird, and latterly myself—were voters in theory and practice and yet sought the society of these non-voters as more stimulating than any other. Sometimes, in the very height of the disunion theory, a single member among the faithful—Stephen Foster in particular—would introduce some new subdivision of a logical point within which a new political party could be organized, although even then Foster could not join such a party himself. but could only indicate it to others, while his courageous wife, Abby Kelley Foster, perhaps repudiated it altogether.

Meanwhile no one met criticism more readily or welcomed them more cordially than Foster, while he retaliated with equal explicitness. "I love my friend Higginson," he once said in a speech at a convention in Worcester; "but if there is anything I loathe, it is his opinions." He was a farmer born and bred, and, as Mr. Garrison once said to me, had put all his combativeness into a rough farm near Worcester, and had made it one of the best. In building stone walls he characteristically excelled, and those of his construction bid fair to last as long as those of the Romans. Once I said to him, unthinkingly, "I should think that, with your love of farming, you would like to have a more productive soil to deal with—in some Western State, for instance." "I should hate farming in the West," he said, vigorously; "I should hate to put my spade into ground where it did not hit against a rock."

Another commanding specimen of the indomitable type was Parker Pillsbury, "brown, broad-shouldered Pillsbury" as Lowell called him, who has only lately died after a life devoted to radicalisms, the extremer the better. He was dark, strongly built, picturesque, with a deep voice like one of the old prophets; and he, with Foster, had been mobbed in town halls, had scaled pulpits and trampled on their cushions, growing always more antagonistic with his self-discipline. He was originally a wagoner; worked his way through Andover Theological Seminary and was refused indorsement by the Faculty unless he gave up speaking in anti-slavery meetings. Never was anything more vivid than Lowell's picture of him, in his description of the Anti-Slavery Fair of 1846:

> Beyond, a crater in each eye,
> Sways brown, broad-shouldered Pillsbury,
> Who tears up words like trees by the roots,
> A Theseus in stout cowhide boots.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> A terrible denouncer he,
> Old Sinai burns unquenchably
> Upon his lips; he well might be a
> Hot blazing soul from fierce Judea,
> Habakkuk, Ezra, or Hosea;
> His words burn as with iron searers,
> And nightmare-like he mounts his hearers,
> Spurning them like avenging Fate, or
> As Waterton his alligator.

MARIA WESTON CHAPMAN
From a daguerreotype taken about 1856.

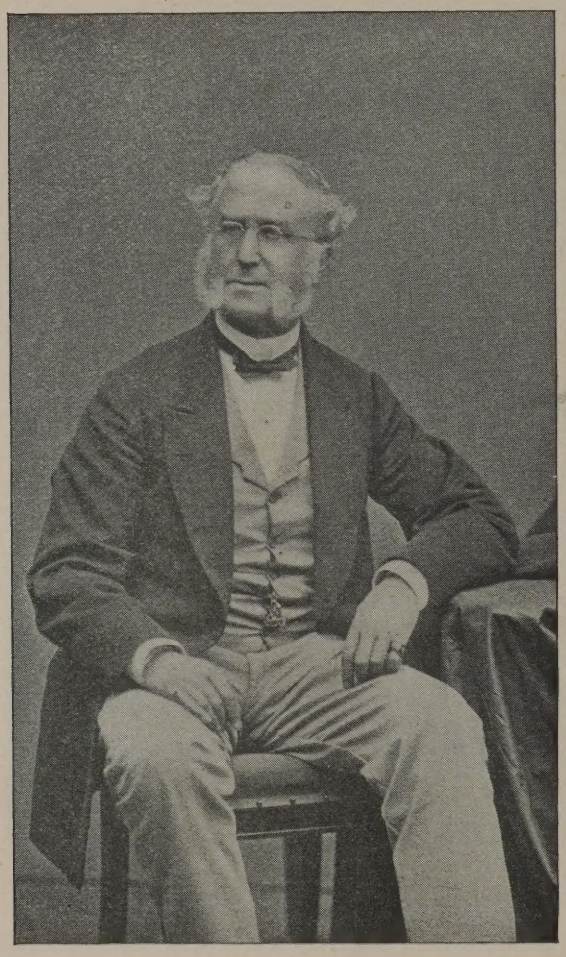
This last is an allusion to the celebrated Charles Waterton, whose picture mounted on an alligator had already got into the schoolbooks. Never was a more masterly delineation of any man than this by Lowell—"the crater in each eye" and all.

In Pillsbury, as in Garrison, one felt the full force of a Calvinistic training and of a mighty knowledge of the Old Testament. Their denunciations—as Dr. Holmes said of the practice of profane swearing—were all traceable to the Puritan pulpit. I can recall no impression profounder than that derived from one occasion when Pillsbury was tearing to tatters some unfortunate orthodox

deacon whom he had heard reading, at a prayer-meeting, Watts's fine hymn, "Am I a Soldier of the Cross?" I still recall the thrill with which his deep voice rolled out the words:

> Are there no foes for me to face?
> Must I not stem the flood
> Is this vile world a friend to grace,
> To bear me on to God?

When Pillsbury paused at each solemn phrase to hold the poor deacon up to it, as if searing him with a red-hot iron—"What



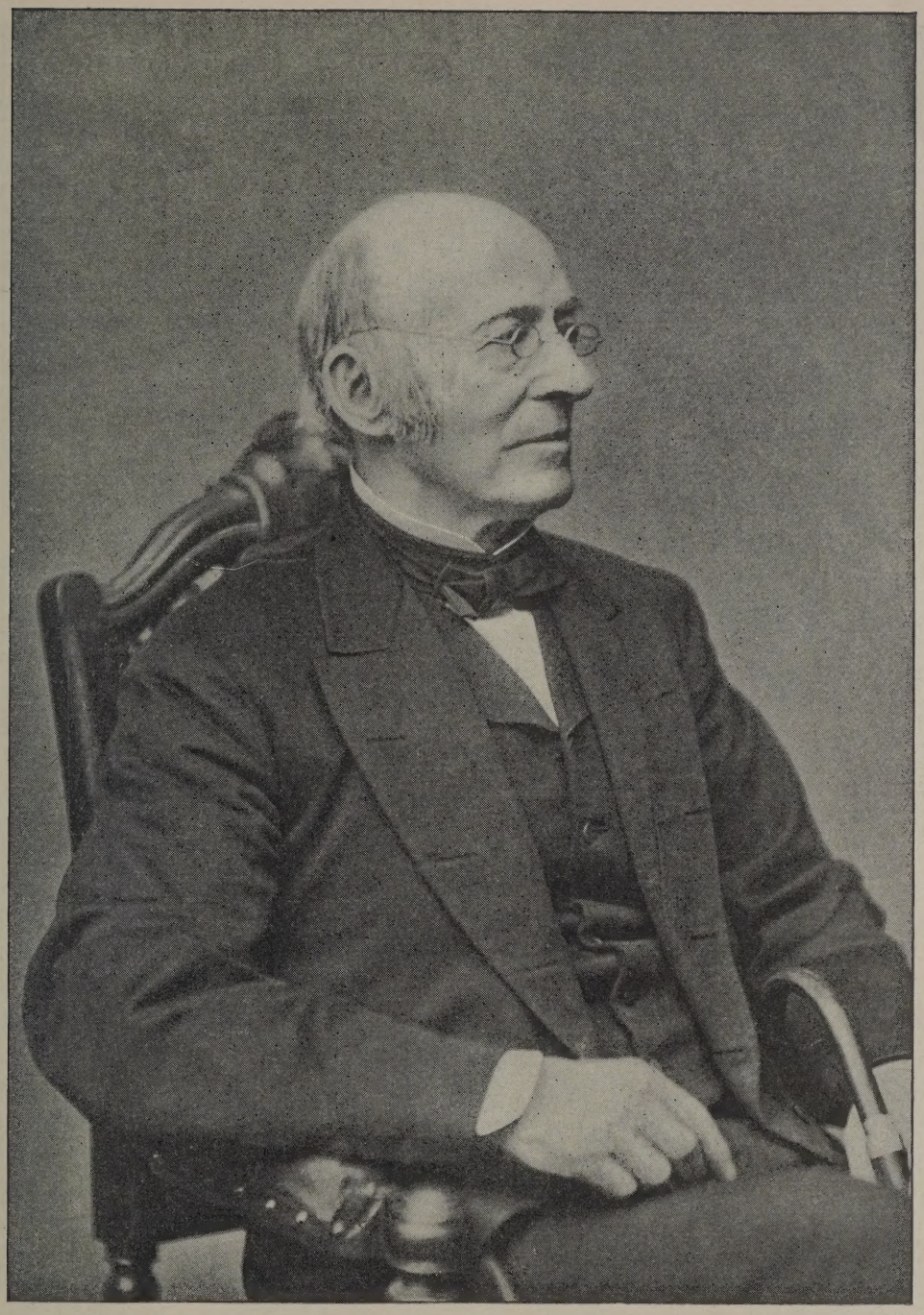
EDMUND QUINCY
From a photograph taken about 1875.

foes had he faced?" "What flood had he stemmed?" "What had this vile world ever done to secure grace for him?" it brought back the fierce old Calvinistic images of the Deity holding the sinner over the flames of hell and dropping him in; and none of Scott's Habakkuk Muckleraths or Crockett's Cameronian hill-folk could have left a more inexorable stamp upon the memory of the hearer.

I dwell on these minor figures, because that of Garrison has been delineated by his sons with wonderful detail and keenness—though, as I think, with something of that one-sidedness which it is perhaps better that a first biography should possess. Phillips also has been frequently discussed and delineated, by myself among others; while Edmund Quincy, the twin of Phillips in social antecedents and sacrifices, but not in oratorical power, has passed far too much out of sight. Coming of a race in which political leadership was and is hereditary, fuller than Phillips of a natural fastidiousness which made the storms and extremes of the platform distasteful to him, Quincy yet did his duty with absolute and unshrinking fidelity; took the fatigues of the convention without its laurels; was readier than any one to make the difficult opening speech before the audience got settled; and was an admirable and patient presiding officer. Always scrupulously dressed, in the blue dress-coat and brass buttons of that day; an exquisite critic on all points of pronunciation, of manners, of language—knowing his Horace Walpole and his Sévigné by heart, and able to solve any problem of European court usage—he had just laid all public life aside, even to his commission as Justice of the Peace, because he believed the Constitution pro-slavery. Nothing could be more curious than the difference between his later years and those of Phillips; when slavery fell, Phillips simply shifted the harness for service in other reforms; while Quincy, like a tired steed, merely shook himself and dropped the reformer's equipment altogether; utterly denied that there was anything left to fight for, and pronounced woman suffrage, for instance, a case in which there was "no grievance." He simply became a reformer *emeritus*, in the university phrase; was for the rest of his life a brilliant and delightful *flâneur*; went to the theater with the constancy of a Parisian; became Secretary of the learned societies which had rejected him in earlier days; resumed, in short, that life of the cultivated Bostonian which Howells has so well painted in his "A Modern Instance" and elsewhere.

The same course was followed in later days by that superb woman, Maria Weston Chapman, whom Lowell, with his usual unerring touch, delineated in his description of the same Anti-Slavery Fair of 1846:

> There was Maria Chapman, too,
> With her swift eyes of clear steel blue,
> The coiled-up mainspring of the fair
> Originating everywhere
> The expansive force without a sound
> That whirled a hundred wheels around,

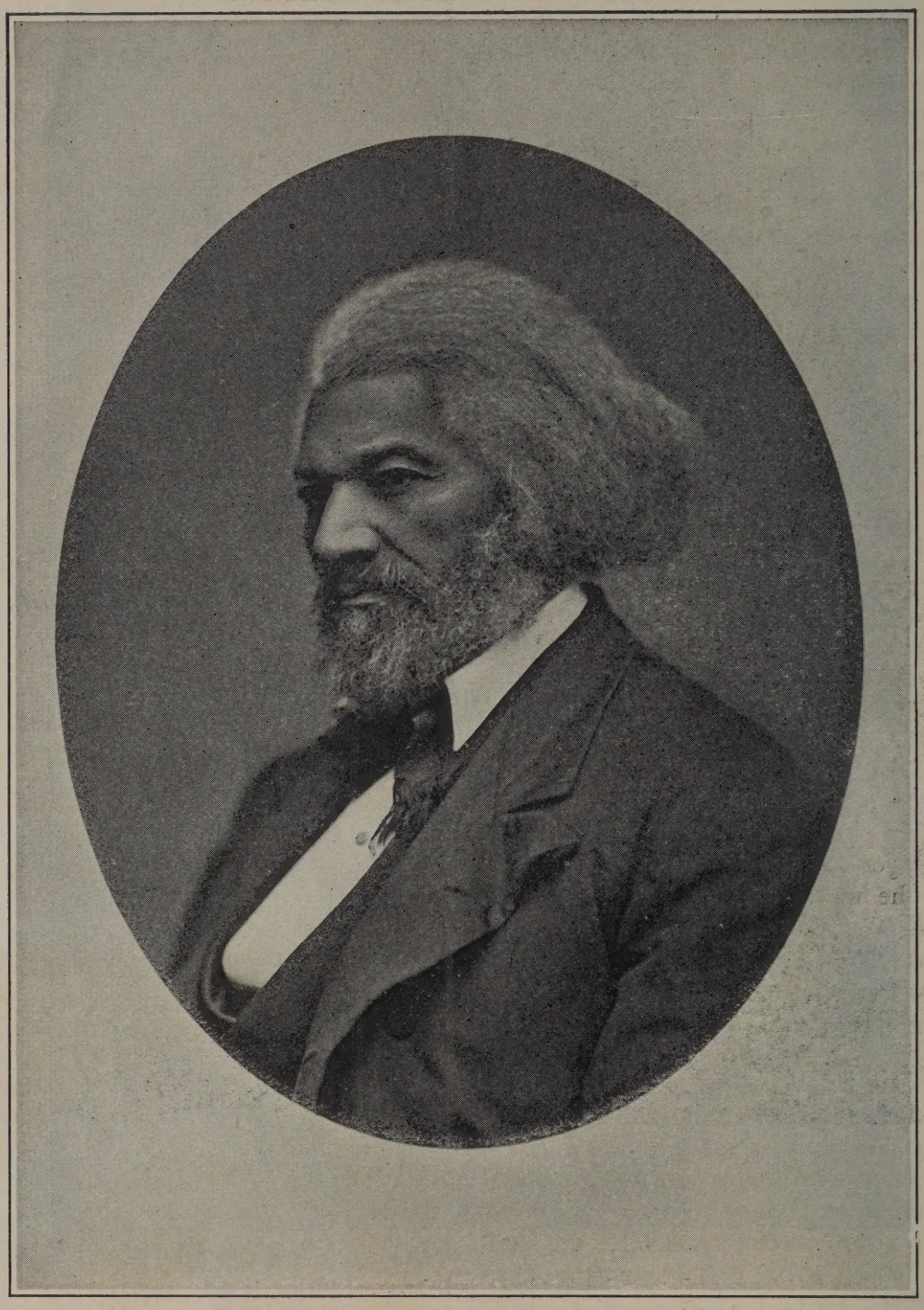


WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON

From a photograph taken by G. K. Warren, of Boston, in 1876.

Herself meanwhile as calm and still
As the bare crown of Prospect Hill;
A noble woman, brave and apt,
Cumæa's sibyl not more rapt,
Who might, with those fair tresses shorn,
The Maid of Orleans' casque have worn,
Herself the Joan of our Ark,
For every shaft a shining mark.

Mrs. Chapman has written herself down for future ages—strong, fearless, self-devoted, unforgiving—in her life of Harriet Martineau, with whom she had much in common. With a beauty which Miss Martineau ranked first in the Boston world of that day; with an energy inexhaustible; with an organizing force which made her more influential than any one man after the great leader in the counsels of the Abolitionists—she was never perhaps more herself than when she faced in absolute fearlessness, on that day of the Garrison mob, the rioters to whom Mayor Lyman conceded, by way of tub to the whale, the privilege of tearing down the modest sign of the Female Anti-Slavery Society. "Ladies!" said the agitated Mayor, "I call on you to disperse this meeting." "Mr. Mayor!" was the reply, "we call on you to disperse this mob." Lowell did not overstate her Joan of Arc temperament, nor yet the "coiled-up mainspring" quality, to which I can fully testify. For instance, I used to go in, with



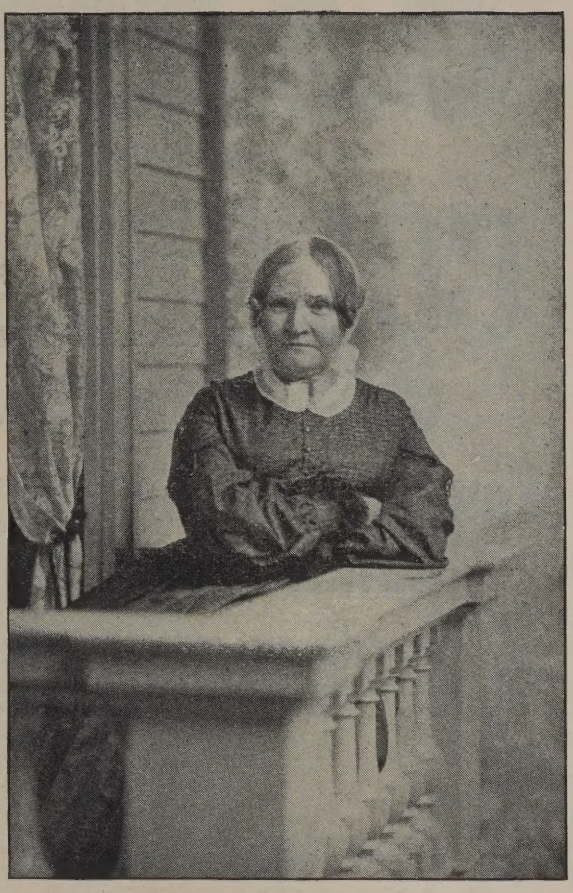
FREDERICK DOUGLASS

From a photograph taken about 1876.

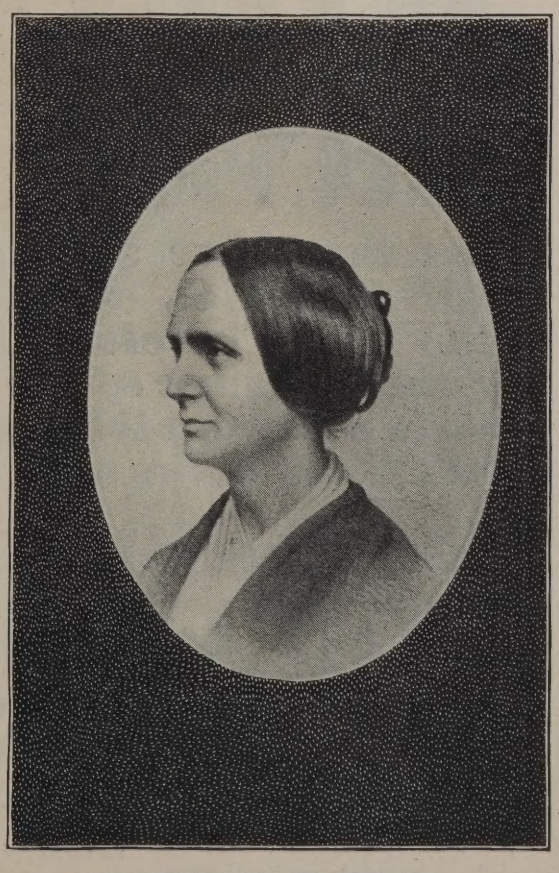
other young people, to assist in decorating Faneuil Hall for the great anti-slavery fair, to which England and America both contributed. One year, I remember, I arrived to find everything in seeming confusion—boxes and barrels to be unloaded, wreaths to be woven and arranged, tables to be spread, rugs to be laid, teamsters and expressmen impatient, plenty of people to do everything, yet nothing done. The answer to every inquiry was, "Mrs. Chapman has been delayed on the railroad." Ten minutes after the appointed time she appeared, placid and inexorable; her queenly figure erect, her "fair tresses" waving and worn high after the fashion of those days. In two minutes more she had taken her stand with a little note-book in the middle of Faneuil Hall; the teamsters and expressmen had laid down their loads and were being paid and discharged one by one; the wreaths were being made and placed; the tables were being spread, every wheel of the clock was in motion, and when the hour of opening came the fair was ready. Sheridan at Winchester did not more instantaneously reveal the leader. Yet when slavery

was abolished, she, too, found her work done; and so far as she prolonged its quarrels and jealousies into her memoir of Harriet Martineau she appeared, as I have already intimated, to the least advantage.

I have often asked myself whether it is really true that the Garrisonian or Disunion Abolitionists were really a superior type of reformers to any other which I have encountered, or whether it is in part a glamour which my youth threw around them. Yet I was not much older when I became intimately acquainted with Social Reformers or Fourierites, with Temperance agitators, with Woman Suffrage advocates; and I have never had quite the same glamour about them. With admirable individuals among all these, yet the collective tone has never seemed to be pitched quite so high. Still less have I found any such elevation of standard among clergymen, for instance, or college professors, or men in public office. I can only explain it by remembering that the anti-slavery reform was, of all such movements, the most absolutely disinterested, with the largest proportion of sacrifice and the smallest of personal benefit. It had undoubtedly in it that possibility of moral danger which even a small body may hold in the way of internal ambitions—as, doubtless, all the tumults of jealousy may rage within the limits of a parish sewing-circle; and some of its leaders were undoubtedly placed by it in a position of higher social prominence than they would otherwise have obtained, and thus gratified their ambition, if such poor ambition they had. For others again—as Phillips, Quincy, and Mrs. Child—it was a life of absolutely pure self-sacrifice; it separated them from the friends, the career, the pursuits which they would otherwise have chosen. The ideal of Phillips's existence, as I have often heard him admit, would have been the Senate or the Bar; and nothing but the purest self-abnegation led him to substitute for this the toilsome career of a wandering lecturer, a life he always hated. He honestly disliked, I think, to hear speeches or even to make them, and yet he gave his life to this arduous work until it became a second nature. More than once, in going to a meeting with him, I have heard him say: "What strange infatuation takes these people to hear public addresses? There is that respectable-looking pair across the street; they must have a happy home, probably with books, pictures, and music. Why do they leave it to hear somebody talk?" No doubt



LYDIA MARIA CHILD
From a photograph taken in 1865 at the age of 63.



ABBY KELLEY FOSTER
From a lithograph by Grozelier about 1858.

CAUTION!!

COLORED PEOPLE

OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,

You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the

Watchmen and Police Officers of Boston,

For since the recent ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN, they are empowered to act as

KIDNAPPERS

AND

Slave Catchers,

And they have already been actually employed in KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES. Therefore, if you value your LIBERTY, and the *Welfare of the Fugitives* among you, *Shun* them in every possible manner, as so many *HOUNDS* on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.

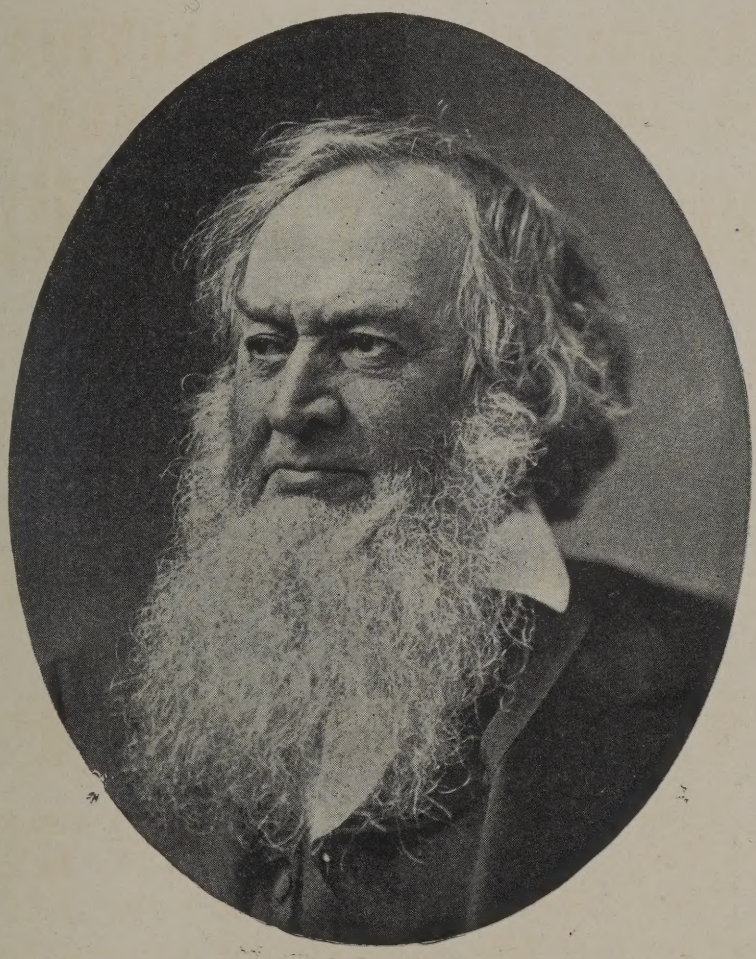
Keep a Sharp Look Out for KIDNAPPERS, and have TOP EYE open.

***APRIL* 24, 1851.**

THEODORE PARKER'S PLACARD

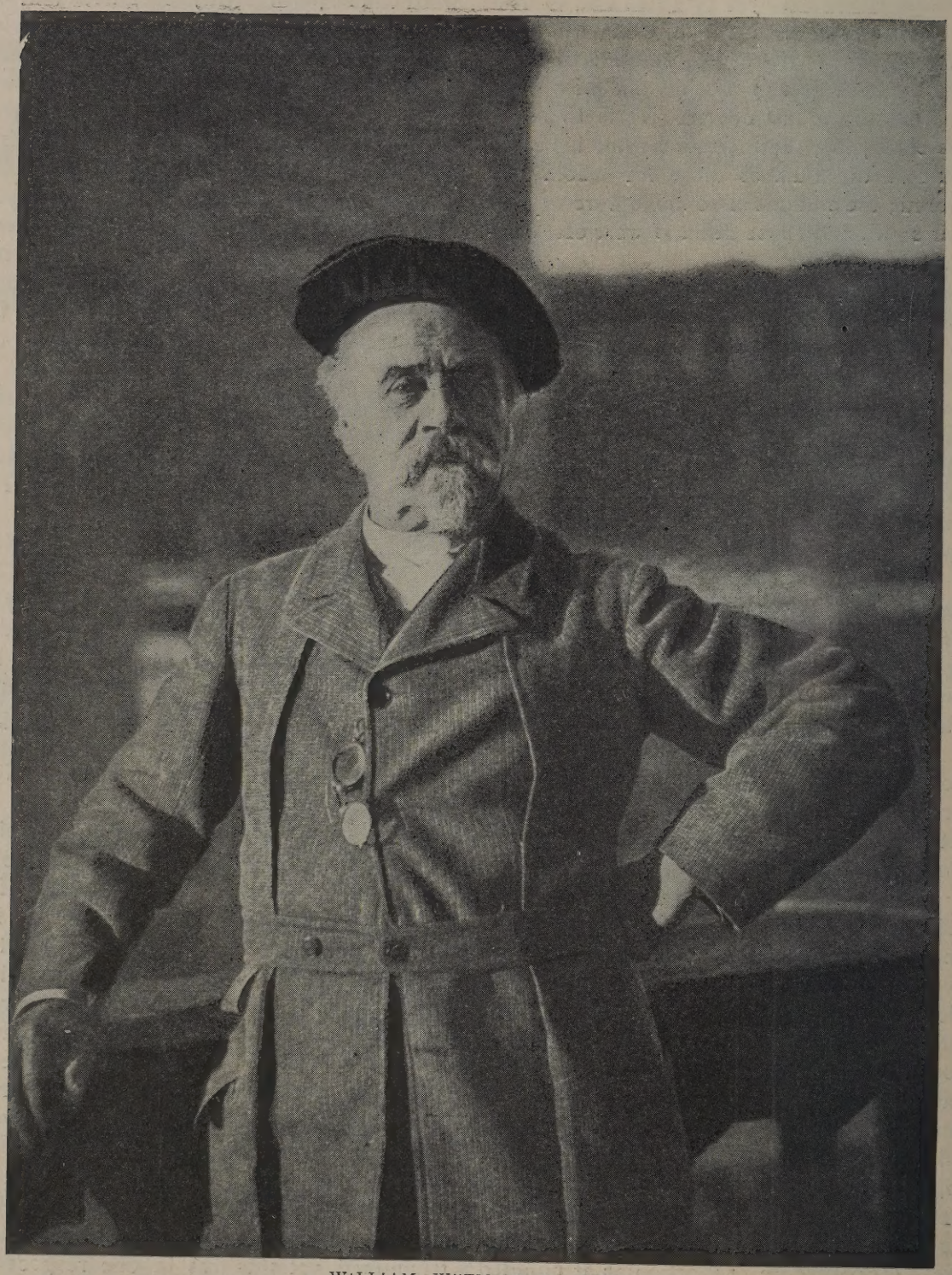
Placard written by Theodore Parker and printed and posted by the Vigilance Committee of Boston after the rendition of Thomas Sims to slavery in April, 1851.

when he came upon the platform he warmed to his work; yet not always even this: young men sometimes went into the gallery to hiss, in order to see his eyes brighten and to hear his voice resound. He had, when off duty, the constant fatigue of beggars and petitioners; for both he and his invalid wife were generous to the last degree. It is to be remembered, too, that neither he nor his allies ever saw the bulk of those for whom they labored; the millions in bondage were beyond their sight, and those at hand were often discouraging. Phillips had not, so far as I know, a trace of that instinctive color-phobia which I have heard admitted by Emerson and by some younger anti-slavery men; and he recognized that intrinsic self-respect and dignity which marked the free colored families of Boston in those days and perhaps still; but he often lamented the want of solid and serious purpose among the colored youth, while allowing fully and magnanimously for their manifold disadvantages. On reflection, I am inclined to revert to my first impression, that the peculiar unselfishness of the anti-slavery reform was that which created a peculiar type of character among its votaries. Of course, in proportion as it mingled itself with political life, temptation came in; and it can hardly be said of the Republican party that it has kept the promise of its youth.



GERRIT SMITH
From a photograph by W. Rurtz, New York, about 1870.

But, whatever may be said of the tone or quality of the Garrisonian Abolitionists, history will accept as final the precedence accorded them by Lincoln in respect to the overthrow of slavery. On the other hand, when they assumed, as they often did, that they were the only type of Abolitionists, they claimed too much. No definition of that word can be permanently recognized that shall include Garrison and Phillips and yet exclude Channing and Parker, Whittier and Sewall, Sumner and Wilson, Palfrey, Gerrit Smith, and James Freeman Clarke. None of these were ever disunionists, either as a matter of policy or principle. Technically, as a policy, disunion undoubtedly failed. It must always be remembered that it was not advocated merely as an abstract point of moral consistency, irrespective of consequences, but as a legitimate working policy to be pursued. Wendell Phillips, in his speech at Music Hall, in Boston, January 20, 1861, argued for it as "the best possible method of abolishing slavery," and advised the North to "build a bridge of gold to take the Slave States out of the Union." Had his advice been followed, it is altogether probable that slavery would be existing to-day, or else that it would have been abolished only through a war severer than the Civil War of 1861–65. There is no question that, while the principles of the Garrisonian Abolitionists ultimately triumphed, yet this was in one respect over the ruins of the precise policy they advocated, the destruction of the Union. It was first pointed out, I think, by Carl Schurz, that, while they were right both in principle and motive, and while Webster, in motive at least, may have been finally wrong, yet it took Webster's influence also to establish, through love of the Union, the final success of the very principle he seemed to sacrifice.



WILLIAM WETMORE STORY

From a photograph by Mr. Waldo Story.

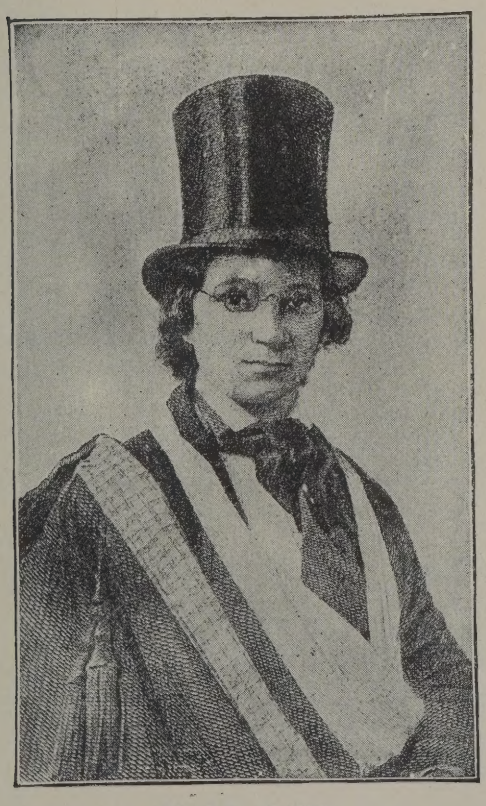
8mo 16 A colored man and wife and one child, and wifes sister from Kentucky - the man having been back from Gilead for them L 4

8mo. 21 A colored woman from Kentucky said she came all the way alone L 0

8mo 24 A colored woman who had been to Canada and went back and got four of her children and one grandchild and arrean and with from Kentucky. D B. 7

FROM RECORD OF FUGITIVES AIDED DURING FIVE MONTHS. KEPT BY DANIEL OSBORN, OF ALUM CREEK SETTLEMENT, OHIO.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM.



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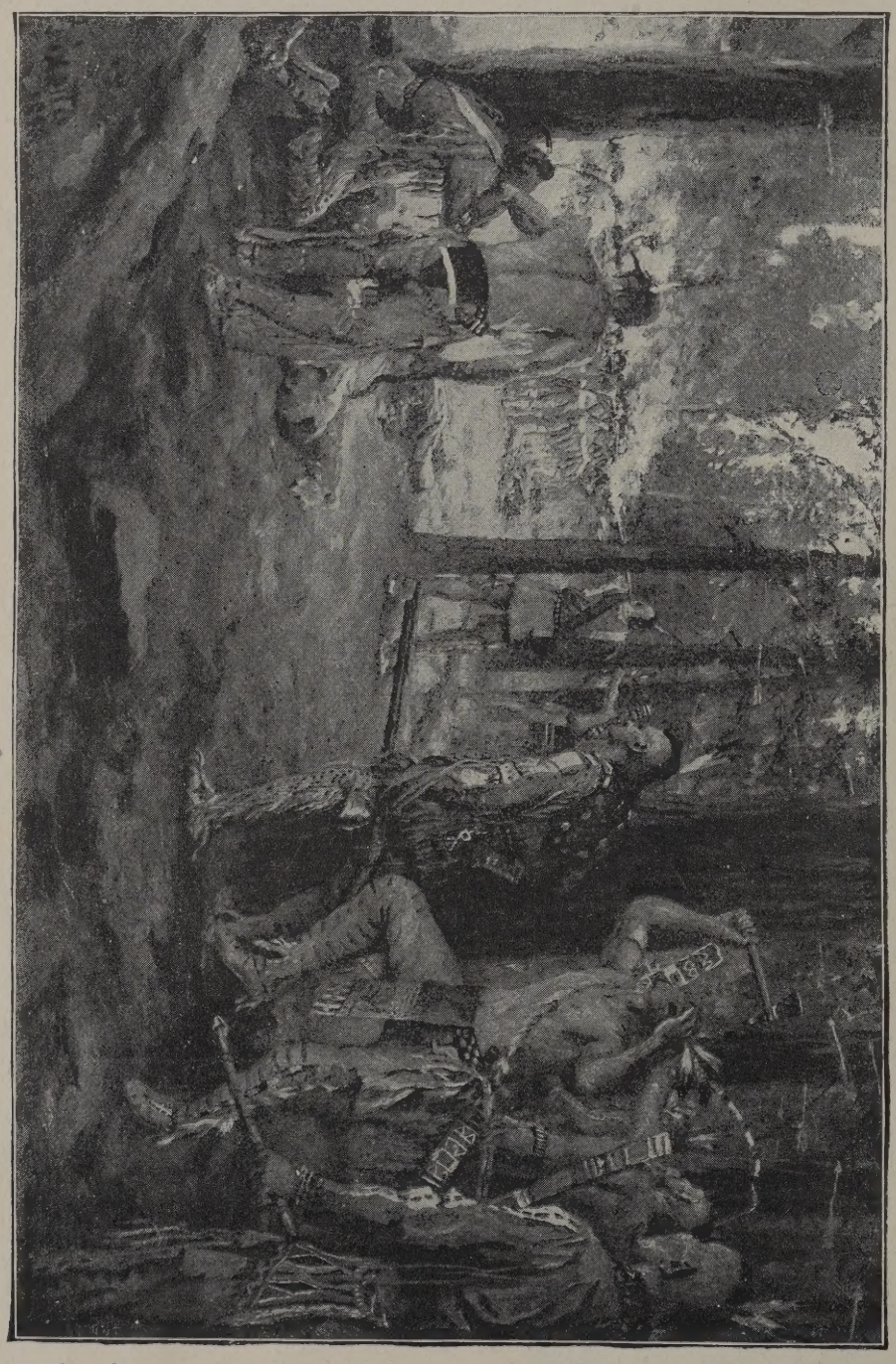

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